Wildland fire use is sometimes a difficult pill to swallow

by Doug Newbould

There is an interesting and very important debate occurring these days, among scientists, land managers, environmentalists, politicians and citizens all across America. What—if anything—should be done about dangerous accumulations of forest fuels, especially in the western United States? Since we've already been through the finger-pointing stage in this debate and most of the blame has been placed upon 20th century forest fire suppression policies and forest management practices, most of the debate is now centered around the "How do we fix it?" question.

Congress tried to deal with the forest health issue back in the mid-90s with the "Salvage Rider," which was designed to streamline the salvage timber sale process on federal lands and reduce the accumulation of dead and dying trees in the nation's forests. That act, signed by President Clinton, and the resulting salvage timber sale programs ultimately failed because they circumvented the NEPA process (National Environmental Policy Act of 1969), effectively eliminating public participation in federal land management decisions.

Now, President Bush is attempting to address the problem with his "healthy forests" initiative, which would feature mechanical thinning of overstocked forests to reduce hazardous fuel conditions. Once again, there is an attempt to "streamline" the decision-making process by reducing public involvement. The success of this initiative, how it is implemented and what effect it will have upon the problem—remain to be seen.

Another land management tool that has been used to address the national fuels problem is the use of fire. Both prescribed fire and wildland fire use can be effective tools for reducing forest fuel accumulations. Both however, come with some degree of risk. Prescribed fire has been used successfully by land managers across the continent for many decades. Occasionally, a prescribed fire has escaped its intended boundaries and done significant damage to public and private resources (remember the Cerro Grande Fire in Los Alamos, New Mexico?). These "bad apples" tend to spoil the whole bushel, resulting in management reluctance and public fear towards the use of prescribed fire.

Wildland fire use, which is the management or use of lightning-caused natural fires to accomplish prescribed land and resource management objectives, is a relatively new tool in the land manager's toolbox. Although natural fires have been allowed to burn in some National Parks, refuges and wilderness areas for decades, wildland fire use has only gained widespread interagency acceptance in the past several years. I have personally worked on both sides of the fence while the debate over "Let it Burn/Put it Out" raged in the eighties and early nineties. I was in Yellowstone in 1988 where on one side of an imaginary line—lightning fires were allowed to burn naturally (Yellowstone National Park), and on the other side we fought with everything we had to put the fires out (Shoshone National Forest).

As the Fire Management Officer on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, I have the full toolbox from which to select an appropriate management response for any natural wildland fire: from full suppression of the fire to simply monitoring the fire, depending upon the values at risk, the fire's behavior, the weather and any other pertinent information. During the 2001 fire season, for example, we decided to suppress the lightning-caused Mystery Hills Fire because of its proximity to the Sterling Highway. But another lightning fire (Thurman Creek) less than ten miles to the northeast, was allowed to burn.

This fire season I experienced another aspect of the debate. In August, I was sent to the Big Fish Fire on the White River National Forest in western Colorado. I was excited when I learned of the assignment, because I worked on the White River NF from 1985 until I moved to Alaska in 1991. In fact, I had spent many a day working and recreating in the area where the Big Fish Fire was located. So before I left Alaska, I studied the national situation report to get more information about the fire. I found out that the Big Fish Fire was started by a lightning strike in the Flat Tops Wilderness and was being managed to consume a heavy accumulation of downed-dead spruce trees from a spruce bark beetle epidemic in the late 1940's. Sound familiar?

My excitement at returning to my old stomping grounds and visiting old co-workers was quickly subdued, however, when I arrived at the fire. I actually felt pain in my heart when I surveyed the devastation of that once-magnificent vista. The whole basin around Trapper's Lake was burned out.

In fact, except for Trapper's Lake and the surrounding vertical-walled peaks, there was little that I recognized. My mind leaped back to a beautiful, sunny day not so many years ago when my wife and I took our two young children and our dog out on Trapper's Lake in our canoe for a leisurely paddle and some cutthroat fishing.

It was a day I'll always remember with love as my son first learned to use an open-faced spinning reel and how we were so proud of his nice casts—that is, up until he accidentally let go of the rod on his ninth or tenth effort. I remember thinking he was going to dive in after it and reaching out to stop him, and how mad he got at himself. But now, all of that was gone. I was again dismayed at the thought that my son or my daughter or my wife and I will never be able to share the beauty of that place with each other or anyone else in our lifetimes. Whether it was right or wrong for the land managers of the White River National Forest to let that natural fire do its thing at that particular time, I don't know. My head says yes, but my heart says no. But I do admire them for making a tough decision, and sticking to their long-range plan. The debate continues.

So, I think I have seen the debate from all sides now. And I don't know if there is a perfect solution to the forest health problems we face here in Alaska and throughout America. But I do know we can't do it in a vacuum. We need to work together, and use all the good management tools available to us, both old and new. And we need to be patient. We can't fix a century's worth of misguided land management policy in a few years, or even a decade. But, we can try.

Doug Newbould is the Fire Management Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at http://kenai.fws.gov.